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SUBJECT: South Africa establishes National Biodiversity
Institute

REF: Pretoria 2001

1. On December 2, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) Marthinus Van Schalkwyk officially launched the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) at Pretoria's National Botanical Gardens. The institute came into being in September 2004, transforming from the National Botanical Institute (NBI) and taking on expanded responsibilities beyond the plant kingdom. The change resulted from new environmental legislation (reftel) signed into law in June 2004 that established SANBI's mandate and responsibilities in respect to South Africa's fauna and flora. Key responsibilities of the institute include reporting the status of biodiversity and all listed and protected species and ecosystems. SANBI controls and maintains all eight of South Africa's botanical gardens, and will collect and disseminate information on biodiversity, as well as maintain a biodiversity database.

National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment

2. In his keynote address at the SANBI launch ceremony, Minister Van Schalkwyk told attendees that his department has commissioned SANBI to facilitate an ongoing "National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment" (NSBA). The purpose of the exercise is to identify spatial biodiversity priority areas for conservation action. The NSBA will contain marine, terrestrial, river and estuary components. The products of NSBA will include reports on the status of the ecosystem, analysis of species of special concern, socio-economic opportunities and constraints on biodiversity. The Minister regards the NSBA as the top priority for SANBI. Initial work on the NSBA began early in 2004 and identified nine priority action areas. The national and provincial cabinets have already approved the draft document of the assessment, which is likely to be published early in 2005. SANBI has also established a biodiversity center in Pretoria, which will function as a global hub for biodiversity (Note: South Africa is considered to be one of the world's most biodiverse countries. End note). The institute will continue the mission of the NBI to provide environmental education to communities and schools, and carry out research projects and conservation activities.

Environmental awareness, poverty relief programs for
communities

3. Minister Van Schalkwyk also stated that plants and animals of Southern Africa have provided food, fuel, medicine and shelter to the people for many centuries, and because of their tremendous contributions they have to be continuously protected. He said his department awarded R70 million or about USD 12 million (US\$ = R5.70) to SANBI for the next three years to develop and implement a "Greening of the Nation Program." The program aims to rehabilitate degraded land, combat air pollution, develop indigenous gardens in schools and prevent the extinction of indigenous medicinal plants and trees. The greening program will be run in Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces. SANBI will also receive R40 million to top up a R60 million fund received in the last three years for upgrading botanical gardens, according to the Minister. The Minister pledged to continue the Poverty Relief Project, one of the projects inherited from NBI, which helped create 826 jobs and develop 58 Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMME) in 2003-4. The Minister said that his department will inject an additional R28 million to the next phase of the project (2005-6). This financial boost will help create 50 more jobs in the national gardens.

SANBI Administration

4. SANBI is a statutory body funded by the Department of

Environmental Affairs and Tourism and other local and international donors. The chairman of the institute is Ms. Bongiwe Njobe, who serves as Director-General in the National Department of Agriculture. SANBI has eight gardens in four provinces. An official of SANBI told EST Assistant that discussions are underway to plan the establishment of another garden in the Eastern Cape.

FRAZER